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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - August 17, 2005

1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

Political Developments

12. Kyoto Protocol

On August 15, Belarus joined the Kyoto Protocol. At the upcoming November meeting of participating countries, the GOB plans to negotiate its terms of participation, hoping to set its emission target at five to eight percent below 1990 levels. [Note: by one estimate, Belarus' current emissions are roughly half of their 1990 level, due to economic dislocations after the fall of the USSR.] The GOB expects it can earn up to USD 325 million annually selling emission rights. Representatives of the UN Economic Commission for Europe will visit Belarus in September to write recommendations on Belarus' participation in the accord.

13. Closer to Kaliningrad

On August 16, Lukashenko ordered increasing trade and economic relations with Kaliningrad, which he described as being closer to Belarus than to Russia. He said that residents there are people of Belarus, "no matter what political forces in Russia might say," and Belarus will provide them with grain, should they need it. The GOB created a special commission to address increasing relations with the Russian exclave and will discuss exports of road and automobile equipment, as well as problems with transit of cargo to Kaliningrad. Lukashenko also said he is considering investing in expanding Kaliningrad's port.

Human Rights

14. Trade Union Evicted

On August 9, the Minsk City Economic Court ordered that the Belarusian Free Trade Union (BFTU) be evicted from their office. According to the Belarusian Congress of Free Trade Unions, once evicted, the BFTU will have no legal address, and the GOB will be free to close the union. The BFTU will appeal the ruling.

15. Journalist's Tapes Seized

On August 10, customs officers confiscated all videotapes from Polish television reporter Mikolaj Wawrzenuik. The tapes contained interviews with members of the Union of Belarusian Poles (UBP) and opposition

figures. Authorities said they will keep the videotapes for ten days. Reporters without Borders reports that since July 6, authorities have arrested, fined, imprisoned or banned from entering Belarus at least 19 journalists as part of the ongoing conflict with Poland.

16. Newspapers Seizure Justified

On August 11, the Dubrovno Prosecutor's Office replied to complaints by the editor of Den newspaper about the May 26 seizure of 1,990 copies of the weekly at the Russian border. The prosecutor's office replied that after a visual examination, police officers noticed that articles mentioned events that occurred after May 9, the date shown as the printing date. This violates established procedure under the media law. The prosecutor's office advised the paper to apply to the regional police department for the return of the seized copies.

17. Severinets Begins Sentence

On August 15, youth opposition leader Pavel Severinets (formerly head of Malady Front) began his two-year restricted freedom sentence in Vetran. Authorities convicted him of organizing an unsanctioned rally in October 2004 to protest the results of the parliamentary elections. He will work as a log piler at a warehouse of Polotskles timber enterprise, moving logs from the crosscutting site to the piling site, then sorting them by size.

18. UBP Member Sentence Extended

On August 12, a judge sentenced UBP first chairman

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Tadeusz Gawin to an additional 15 days in prison for allegedly starting a fight with a cellmate. Gawin claimed that the cellmate, who has a criminal record, started the fight. The UBP believes that the sentence is politically motivated. [Note: Gawin is a short, thin man in his 50's, not a likely brawler.]

Economics

19. Monthly Pension Up

On August 11, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security announced that average retirement pensions will increase to USD 100 on September 1, from a current USD 92. This is in accordance with a request from the President.

110. Health Price Regulation

On August 12, Lukashenko signed a decree regulating the pricing of medications, medical products and medical equipment. The decree sets upper limits for wholesale and retail prices, which do not depend upon the origin of the goods and which are lower than current limits. To strengthen financial discipline at health care establishments, the decree specifies that the National Bank's official exchange rates must be used when buying medications with foreign currency. The GOB expects these measures to save money for the state budget.

Relations with Poland

111. Poles Refuse Belarusian Children?

In early August Belarusian state television claimed that Polish authorities refused to allow a group of children

enter the country to go to a summer camp in Oletsko. Therefore, the GOB provided space for them at a high quality camp in Belarus. The deputy mayor of Oletsko denied inviting the children in the first place, while the Polish Consulate claims that they gave visas to the children. Journalist Igor Bantser believes that someone from the UBP simply failed to organize the trip, and the state media accordingly used the incident to aggravate the current conflict.

¶12. Humanitarian Action

On August 16, the Belarusian embassy in Warsaw condemned Polish efforts to collect foodstuffs, second hand clothes and essential goods for Poles and the opposition in Belarus as "anti-Belarusian propaganda, aimed at creating the image of Belarus as a poor and timid country". The administration of Warsaw is conducting a donation drive to gather preserved foodstuffs, clothes, air conditioners, personal hygiene products and school supplies to help Belarusian Poles and those who oppose Lukashenko.

¶13. UBP Seal Missing

On August 15, police interrogated UBP disputed leader Anzhelika Boris about the disappearance of the official seal of the UBP. Former leader Tadeusz Kruczkowski filed a report about the missing seal on August 5. He claimed that the economist and chief accountant of the UBP told police that Boris had taken the seal from them. Boris denies this.

Miscellaneous

¶14. Lukashenko Unhappy with Minsk

On August 15, Lukashenko described the region as neglected and strictly forbade any construction on arable lands, commenting that it "looks like an atomic bomb was blown up near Minsk. I will not tolerate this attitude to the land." He charged government officials with "fixing things" by November 7. The President also encouraged increasing productivity of Minsk district two to four times.

¶15. Pig Breeding

On August 11, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection announced plans to build

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Europe's largest pig-breeding complex on the border with Lithuania. They plan to build two complexes in the Grodno region; each housing up to 108,000 pigs. The Ministry stated that large meat exports to Russia necessitate the increase in pig production. The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs believes that construction of these complexes is retaliation for Lithuanian plans to build a nuclear waste storage plant on the border, and expressed concern about the pig waste polluting nearby rivers.

¶16. Autodealers in Trouble

On August 12, the State Customs Committee (SCC) began legal proceedings against executives of several large automobile dealerships. The SCC charges executives of Yukola-Avto LLC, Atlant Concern, Avtodinamo LLC and PM Market CJSC of importing cars for personal use, then selling them through the companies.

Quotes of the Week

¶17. On August 12, Lukashenko expressed his confidence of victory in the 2006 presidential election and decried the quality of the opposition in Belarus.

"I am not trembling with fear that I might lose power, and this is my advantage. Pardon my lack of modesty, but I think the people will support me. We know perfectly well those who are eager to get into the president's seat. [But] they should stay away from power, as they hate their people. Our so-called opposition is troubled about the idea of losing money. They are rushing about like cockroaches in a tight corner and will cut each other's throats."

¶18. On August 16, Andrey Charukhin, deputy head of the Foreign Relations Department of the Ministry of Education, whilst speaking about student travel abroad, touched on parents' reactions.

"We receive a lot of calls from parents who thank us for our work, but there are those of discontent, of course, but presidential decrees are to be executed, not discussed."

PHLIPOT